Introduction

Defining the Ultraminor

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The expansion of comparative and world literary studies over the past two decades has brought a much wider range of literatures into discussion than had formerly been the norm, when “world literature” typically meant the canonical masterpieces of a few major powers. Starting in the 1970s, increasing attention began to be given to “minor” literature, still typically written within major languages, as in the case of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s seminal *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (1975). Various interpretations and redirections, Deleuze and Guattari’s term has been enormously productive for studies of minority discourse, in postcolonial studies, and in the case of countries understood as peripheral to major metropolitan centers. As world literary studies broadens its scope beyond imperial trade routes and established center-periphery relations, it becomes desirable to look for new terms to complicate or supplement the now classic major/minor binary, as we explore the varied scales on which literature can be studied.

Looking not only beyond the dominant spaces, languages, and agents but beyond minor literatures and cultures as well, the investigation of differing scales reveals new possibilities. This issue of the *Journal of World Literature* is dedicated to proposing one possible new frame of reference: that of the ultraminor. This term reflects the need to think small cultural spaces more accurately than the broader and still somewhat blurry category of minor literatures allows us to do. The essays presented in this issue, and in a following cluster that will appear later this year in issue 2:4, offer a range of situations in which the term may be usefully applied.

Any definition of a literature based on its scale necessarily presents boundary questions, and where to draw the line between minor and ultraminor is not

something that can be defined absolutely or in terms of a single factor. As Naren Prasad points out regarding small states: “there is no theoretical justification for taking a particular size as a cut-off point” (44). How then do we separate ultraminor from small and minor? The ultraminor, only makes sense in a felt and experienced relational context, and contexts will vary greatly from community to community. These relationships may also vary for a given community amid shifting political circumstances and social relations, the growth or decline in use of a language, and changing conditions of literary production and circulation. Over time, a literature may shift from minor to ultraminor or the reverse, or may even achieve major status in the event of a dramatic increase in literacy or a small country’s growth into an empire. The difference between minor and ultraminor is a kind of ladder, as described in Andrea Bachner’s essay on Taiwanese literature: “the relations of the ultraminor no longer only address the next scalar level, but can move between different scales.” Several of the essays in this issue have pointed out this flexible shift within literary practice from one time to another and from one location to another. This issue makes clear the fluid relations between a whole family of concepts: ultraminor, minor, and major.

To be of any analytical use, the concept of ultraminor literatures can only be considered as compared with greater ones. The size of a linguistic or literary community is obviously an important factor, but the way of measuring the ultraminor preferably goes beyond the demographical aspect of population. Ultraminor literatures and cultures can be thought of in terms of the several criteria that Prasad applies to small states, which “can be defined by the size of their population, GDP, land area, level of trade, or by a combination of all four of these indicators” (44). For literature, to these criteria we need to add considerations of a linguistic community’s size, its literacy rates, the relative vitality of oral traditions, and access to publication or other means of preservation and dissemination. The fundamental idea behind this approach to the concept of ultraminor is scaling in terms of the relationship between size and structure: “Size is seldom *just size*,” as Franco Moretti has noted (147). Structure changes when size changes. The ultraminor size constantly generates a certain structure in terms of patterns of living, thinking, mapping, remembering, and speaking, all with consequences for aesthetic developments.

Fundamentally the ultraminor size entails structural handicaps and a systemic lack of capacity and resources connected both to space and to time. In the case of small islands, no hinterland, no metropolis, and perhaps not even any large towns, and for ultraminor communities generally, a sense of belatedness, clustered ideas, and a short historicity of modernity. As Donald MacLeod has remarked, island communities traditionally “possess a limited

resource base, tiny domestic market, diseconomies of scale, poor accessibility, limited infrastructure and institutional mechanism and a high degree of dependency on external forces" (15). At the same time, ultraminor literatures and cultures develop all kinds of survival strategies to mitigate these inherent shortcomings. The ultraminor size, even more than just small or minor size, compels compensation strategies generated by a survival struggle, as will be seen in Bergur Rønne Moberg's essay, which emphasizes the productive, self-generating dimension of the ultraminor pervading every aspect of the production of Faroese culture.

The approach to a definition of ultraminor literature first of all presents itself as a more radical version of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of "minor literature." They were concerned with works written in a major language from a marginal position, subverting or deterritorializing it from within: "The first characteristic of a minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (*Kafka* 16). Such a literature is thoroughly political, and it has a collective value. Their conception developed within the complex cultural environment of the "triple ghetto" of Prague German-Jewish writing, centering on Kafka, writing in a major language while located within a minority community in Prague. By contrast, an ultraminor literature may be produced within a distinct but small language community, very much based in a specific territory. Far from deterritorializing a hegemonic class or culture, an ultraminor literature may be used to create or bolster the community's territorial integrity, as will be seen in this issue in Oliver Friggieri's discussion of Maltese.

While Deleuze and Guattari's point of departure is socio-historic, the concept of the ultraminor is explored in the following essays through spatial and linguistic as well as socio-historic contexts. The whole perspective changes when including size, whether of the physical landscape, or the speech community, or the market, as defining features. Doreen Massey conveys the focal point in this thought: "It is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too" (6). Instead of "setting up a minor practice of major language from within" in order to define "marginal literature" (Deleuze and Guattari 18), the ultraminor sets the stage for describing the aesthetic and cultural consequences of the size itself of ultraminor literatures and the whole surrounding culture. Indeed, size is always relative, and compared with the size of minor and major literatures, the structure of ultraminor literature becomes clear. The attention to the smallest sizes can lead to a pervasive shift in the dominant mode of analyzing minor literature as well, often defined by resistance and asymmetrical power relations. In the same way as "ultraminor" more or less is developed out of "minor," the minor can gain new

explanatory power through its relations to the ultraminor in a world characterized by a crisscrossing set of routes between centre and periphery in late modernity. Thus, to take one example, Danish literature can be considered a minor or semi-peripheral literature within Europe, but it is a major force for the ultraminor Faroese, for whom Copenhagen is a predominant cultural center.

A further quality of the ultraminor is its fluid relation to the minor and major literatures with which they come into contact. A given work, or even an entire language, can shift in status from one location to another, from major to minor to ultraminor, as Bhavya Tiwari argues in the case of the Malayalam novel *Chemmeen*, whose ultraminor fishermen's dialect becomes lost in translation, making the resulting novel part of a seemingly seamless "minor" language now being reproduced the more dominant Bengali, Hindi, or English. Yet at the same time, the work proved to enjoy far greater success in its English translation than in its Bengali or Hindi avatars, after UNESCO promoted the English version worldwide as a major representative of "Indian" literature.

In this case as often, translation assumes special importance in the dissemination and even the survival of ultraminor texts, which may have very few readers at home (*Chemmeen* is known today to Malayalis chiefly through a popular movie version). Translation functions differently, but equally crucially, in Andrea Bachner's essay on bilingualism and translation in indigenous Taiwanese literature, in Andrea Cabajsky's study of Francophone Acadian literature as variously presented for speakers of standard French and for Anglophone readers, and again in Elisa Segnini's probing account of the political and stylistic choices involved in two translations of Shakespeare into Italian dialects. Time is also a recurrent and often urgent issue for ultraminor literatures, sometimes written in a language or dialect on the verge of extinction (as in one but not the other of Segnini's two cases), or in an archaic language now practiced only by a few modern writers.

Space remains a defining characteristic of a good deal of ultraminor literature, often in the distinctive form of ethnic enclaves or of outright islands. Living in one of the world's smallest capitals, the Faroese writer William Heinesen was surrounded by the ocean and an emerging culture where everything modern was new and largely without developed cultural institutions. As Moberg shows in his essay, Heinesen creates the Faroe Islands as a quintessentially littoral, liminal space, lacking any hinterland but open to the shifting currents of modernity. The field of Island Studies thus has a particular relevance for Faroese literature, as it does for Mauritius, which Rashi Rohatgi explores comparatively vis-à-vis the fiction of Norway, perched on the periphery of the European landmass.

Taken together, this group of seven essays may suggest something of the range of situations that the concept of the ultraminor can help us to understand. As they explore the creative responses of writers on the periphery of other peripheries, our contributors also sketch out some of the different ways in which the concept has to be adapted or even challenged in a given case. Many more cases could be found, and new avenues and sea routes of the ultraminor wait to be explored. We hope that the essays presented here will inspire further development of this idea, in the pages of *JWL* and beyond.

Works Cited

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